



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Emor 5769

By Alana Alpert

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Tzedakah can seem unnatural: we never want to give up what we have. When we have a lot, we say, “It’s mine—I worked hard for it and I want to keep it.” When we don’t have a lot or are worried that we won’t, we say, “It’s mine—I need it, so I can’t give it away.” The instinct to hoard is common, and the Torah goes out of its way to urge against it.

In the middle of a discussion about the festivals, *Parshat Emor* repeats the *mitzvah* we learned last week in *Parshat Kedoshim*:

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.”¹

Why would these verses, repeated almost verbatim, reappear in the midst of laws about the festivals? Scholar Nehama Leibowitz explains that the festivals—marking the harvest season—are a particularly joyous time, and in joy we might forget the poor.² Indeed, the jubilation and pride we feel at a successful planting season may lend itself to a strong sense of entitlement akin to our response to *tzedakah* in a time of plenty: *I worked hard for this harvest and I want to keep it.*

Rabbi Moshe Alshech, a 16th century commentator from Tsfat, offers a radical reading of the verse, “and when you reap the harvest of your land,” that dispels the myth of ownership that underlies this instinct to hoard. He points out that “your land” is plural, explaining that “the Torah uses the plural to designate the common ownership of the field by the owner, the poor, and the stranger, for in truth, they share in it.”³ He says:

Do not think that you are giving to the poor from your own possession, or that I despised the poor person by not giving him as I gave you. For he is my son, as you are, and his share is in your grain; it is to your benefit to give him his share from your property.⁴

Ultimately then, we are simply giving the poor their share. I may have a deed to the land. I may have sown the seeds. I may have plowed the field. But the harvest does not belong to me. And so the verses in *Parshat Emor* remind us to curb our proprietary reaction to acquiring wealth and to be cognizant of the poor in times of plenty.

Yet the inverse question—how do we remember our obligations to the poor during times of limited resources?—is perhaps even more important. How can we respond when the needs of the poor are great but the resources of the

¹ Leviticus 23:22.

² Leibowitz, Nehama. *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol. 2. Jerusalem: Chemed, 1995. p. 445.

³ Torat Moshe on Leviticus 19. Translation from: David Hartman, Tzvi Marx, Noam Zion. *The Dynamics of Tzedakah: From Dependence to Dignity*. Jerusalem: The Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Studies, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.*

owner of the field are few? This question is especially poignant for us today, in the midst of our financial crisis. Estimates for decline in philanthropy this year demonstrate that when times are hard, most people are less sensitive, rather than more, to those who have it harder. We are all instinctually feeling, *I need it, so I can't give it away.*

But during times of economic crisis, the poor—especially people living in the Global South—are among the hardest hit.⁵ The cost of food and fuel are rising and job loss is rampant. Estimates say “the global economic crisis will cause an additional 22 children to die per hour, throughout all of 2009.”⁶ When the Global South needs financial support more than ever, people all over the world are holding back, rather than giving.

The Torah's instructions for harvesting are there to subvert this instinct to hoard during a recession. The law states, “You shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field.” It does not clarify whether the farmer had a good or a bad crop yield. Thus, whether I have earned a lot or a little this year, I am still required to give enough for those who have less than I do. We are reminded of this in the laws of the *Mishneh Torah* which state that even a poor person is expected to give *tzedakah*.⁷

Our challenge is to remember our obligation to the poor always: in times of plenty and times of need. The corners of our field do not belong to us; they never did. We cannot glean all the way to the edges of the field even if the produce yield is low. Let us struggle to rise above the natural reaction to hoard out of pride or fear, and rather, sanctify our harvests through generosity.



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⁵ Rowling Megan. “G20 summit must not neglect poor nations—World Bank president,” 31 March, 2009.

http://www.alertnet.org/db/an_art/20316/2009/02/31-174151-1.htm.

⁶ Kristof, Nicholas, “At Stake are More than Banks.” *The New York Times*, 1 April, 2009.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/02/opinion/02kristof.html>.

⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:5.

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